

February Celebration 2009.5

*Remarks by President Ronald Liebowitz
January 30, 2010, Mead Memorial Chapel*

Good morning. It's a pleasure to welcome to Mead Chapel all who have come to celebrate the achievements of the class of 2009.5. I am delighted to have the opportunity to address you today—to help see 101 of you off—as you make your way from college to your next exciting challenge.

Whatever that next venture may be (for those of you who are indeed leaving), you should feel a sense of great accomplishment for all you have achieved while you were here. You should also carry with you great confidence because your time here has prepared you well to meet just about any challenge these dynamic times place before you. I will elaborate a bit on this message in a few minutes, but I want first to give you and your guests here today a brief profile of your class—the class of 2009.5.

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There are 101 seniors in today's celebrating class. As I reported last evening, 79 of you actually began your Middlebury careers as Febs.

There are 47 men and 54 women in your class. Thirteen of you came from—GUESS which state was tops: Massachusetts. Ten came from New York, nine from Vermont, eight from California, and six from New Hampshire. Your class included eight international students, from Argentina, Colombia, Peru, Jamaica, Korea, Latvia, Palestine, and Sweden.

Eleven of you majored in English—the most popular major—with Geography, International Studies, Political Science, and History rounding out the top five majors. Twenty-four of you majored in more than one subject.

More than half of you—53 out of 101—studied abroad, and 82 of you studied a foreign language.

And your academic accomplishments were, well ... Febulous! Included in your class are:

- three nominees for Thomas J. Watson Fellowships, which provide grants to graduating seniors for a year of independent study and travel outside the United States;
- a nominee for the Keasbey Scholarship, which supports two years of graduate work at one of four British Universities; and
- a nominee for the Churchill Scholarship, awarded to outstanding students with "a capacity to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the sciences, engineering, or mathematics."

A number of you distinguished yourselves in scientific studies. Members of this class were selected to give presentations:

- before the American Chemical Society;
- at a renewable energy conference in Las Vegas;
- before the Geological Society of America;
- and at the International Association of Great Lakes Research.

And two of your classmates had their off-Broadway debuts last summer as actors in the Potomac Theatre Company's highly lauded production of *The Europeans* at Atlantic Stage 2 in New York.

Many in your class have demonstrated a strong commitment to volunteerism and community service. It would be hard to gauge the full extent of your service to the local community and beyond, but here are just a few examples:

- You played key roles in the MiddVote effort that helped to register a record number of students before last year's national election.
- You volunteered as mentors to students in many area schools and in the Upward Bound program.
- You volunteered for service at local organizations like Charter House (a transitional-housing shelter), WomenSafe (which helps abused women and their children), and the United Way.
- You worked with the student Juntos group, which provides translation, ESL (English as a Second Language) tutoring, and other services to area migrant farmers.
- You used Middlebury Alternative Break trips to work with farmers in Mexico and the Dominican Republic.
- And you worked on multiple initiatives promoting carbon reduction, alternative energy development, and local food production.

Also among you are athletes who have helped Middlebury capture four NESCAC titles and two NCAA championships.

In addition to all of those accomplishments, you are leaving Middlebury an ongoing legacy in *MiddBlog*, which was created by one of

your classmates. About 20,000 people consult *MiddBlog* every month to find out what's happening, take the alternative college tour—or hear about the administration's latest mishap or lapse in judgment.

Individually and collectively, you have accomplished much in four short years, and we are tremendously proud of you. All of us here today salute you. Congratulations.

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If you took a poll of Vermonters and asked which month they liked the least, the vast majority would choose February. Said Joseph Wood Krutch, one of the great literary naturalists of the early 20th century, "The most serious charge which can be brought against New England is not Puritanism but February."

February is the year's "dark predawn"—it's cold and quiet. But most of you came to Middlebury in February, which says something about your character. It suggests that you are optimists—a little nonconformist, willing to take risks ... eager, as poet Robert Frost wrote, "to take the road less traveled by."

Those are important characteristics that I think you share with your College. One thing that's always marked Middlebury since its founding is a willingness to do things differently ... to innovate ... to take a calculated risk in order to accomplish something extraordinary. A College that began as an experiment in an out-of-the-way farming settlement of about 400 in the year it was proposed by Gamaliel Painter and some fellow townspeople, has developed into one of the leading liberal arts institutions in the country largely because like you, it has done things a bit out of the ordinary.

You have many reasons to be proud to be a Middlebury graduate, and, over time, I know we will make you even prouder. Today, we are here to celebrate you and your accomplishments, and to convey all of our warm congratulations and let you know how proud we—the entire College community—are of you.

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As you leave Middlebury, it is fitting to ask yourself what it is you will remember most about your time here, and what part of your college experience will make the greatest difference in your life post-Middlebury.

As a geographer, I would like to think your answer would be the place itself—the physical environment—that will exert the greatest and most durable influence on you. Who can argue with Wallace Stevens, who wrote, "His soil is man's intelligence." We learn from our environment, and the places that teach us things that truly matter are carried forever in our hearts and our brains.

The natural beauty that surrounds us here is likely to be one of the things you will remember most about Middlebury. I am sure that many of you have experienced some unexpected moments of joy as you walked to class on one of those spectacular autumn days when the vibrant foliage on the mountains stood out sharply against the blue sky; or walked on that pristine white carpet each morning during J-Term, left by the light snow that seems to fall each night; or seen the multiple shades of green that burst across the landscape in the spring—even if spring most often doesn't show itself until you are about to leave for summer break. And of course, there are the breath-taking views of both the Adirondacks and Green Mountains from the College's Snow Bowl ... soon to be experienced in a slightly different way later this morning. (Freezing, for one!)

These simple things have inspired a sense of adventure and creativity in generations of students who have studied at Middlebury, along with remarkably strong feelings of attachment. I hope you will take with you an appreciation for this corner of the natural world, now firmly rooted in your hearts, wherever you go, along with the sense of wonder that it inspires.

But when one speaks of "place," one must include the human as well as the physical characteristics of that particular place when considering its overall impact on one's personal development and life.

And when you think back on your Middlebury years, I am sure you'll find that your memories of this place are, more than anything else, linked to its people—your friends, your professors, your teammates, your coaches, staff members, and your acquaintances in town.

Seated around you today are 100 fellow Febs—the real and the converted—many of whom are very likely to be your friends for life. Through the years, they will celebrate your achievements, reach out to you when you stumble, share your joys and disappointments, and always remain close to you.

Friendships like these, which began in the cold and bluster of a Middlebury February, are often intense, especially when they develop in a community that is small and relatively isolated, and where there are few distractions to compete for one's social and intellectual energies. Your time here has helped you develop the kind of relationships that is hard to replicate in any other environment. It has also given you an appreciation for the strength of community, which will no doubt influence how you interrelate with others throughout your lives—in a more personal, caring, and actively engaged manner.

One of the great advantages of attending a small, residential College is the opportunity to work with faculty and staff outside the traditional classroom to make a difference in the life and direction of the institution. And many of you have, and on multiple projects. To cite just one example: the College has undertaken a number of initiatives to minimize its impact on the environment—establishing a campus-wide recycling and composting program, buying local foods, following sustainable building practices, lowering the thermostats in buildings during the heating season, installing a new biomass facility that has reduced our dependency on high-carbon-yielding oil by 50 percent, and committing, nearly three years ago, to be carbon neutral by the year 2016. These ideas and the energy and commitment to see them through came largely from Middlebury students, and have been supported enthusiastically by faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees.

Beyond the benefits that accrue to the College for this kind of engagement, these initiatives, and many others that involve student volunteer work at and around the College, are perfect examples of how a liberal arts education should work, and why a liberal arts

education is the best preparation for life: We ask you to learn about a broad range of subjects in a formal classroom setting, and then we challenge you to use what you learned to make a difference outside that classroom.

Crucial to your successes has been an engaged and dedicated faculty. Collectively, your professors represent one of the true gifts you received during the past four years. Great teachers inspire you by their intense and passionate interest in their fields, which, in turn, motivates you to engage material in a more personal way and to go beyond the standard learning of facts so that you can make important connections and understand the larger world around you.

The true value of your liberal arts education is that it prepares you to live in a rapidly changing world that is likely to get more complex and less predictable in the coming years. The great American patriot and president, John Adams, who played many roles in his long life, said, "There are two types of education, both crucial: One teaches us how to make a living, and the other how to live."

But learning how to live—how to be active and productive citizens and draw satisfaction from life itself—will be different for you than it was for your parents' generation, and even different from those who sat where you are now sitting just a few years ago. The social changes associated with globalization, and now the backlash or reaction to them, will require you to marshal all the skills you have learned at Middlebury to navigate an exciting, but uncertain future.

Over the past two decades, globalization has made the world feel smaller ... brought closer together through the lowering of political, social, financial, and, to some degree, cultural barriers. Transactions now occur as if New York and Hong Kong were neighboring municipalities, and competition for jobs and other opportunities is no longer determined by where people grow up, where they live, or what citizenship they hold. The local has become the global, and global the local. What is happening in China, Europe, and Latin America, or just about anywhere in the world, affects us in this country, even in rural Vermont, as much as or more than what is going on in many parts of the United States.

Though the processes that have led to the so-called "flattening" of the world over the past two decades have not come to a halt, the recent world-wide recession, has added multiple levels of complexity to the already significant changes brought on by globalization. They have resulted in problems whose solutions no two economists can seem to agree on. And no one can tell us why economists did not see this train wreck coming.

The failure of our financial institutions and its impact on the global economy reflect the high level of interdependence and interconnectedness among the world's national economies. Yet, despite this interconnectedness, we have seen separate, often divergent and non-coordinated policies implemented to deal with the financial crisis in many of the world's largest economies: in the U.S., U.K, France, Germany, Japan, and China. We see, and now must adjust to, the power of the individual nation-state to exercise its sovereignty in an attempt to protect its own population, economy, and failed businesses by implementing stimulus packages and rescue plans as if it were 1910 instead of 2010—as if interdependence across national boundaries did not exist.

We must also confront the inefficiencies in our democratic system of governance, or perhaps admit to, and address, the overly politicized nature of our legislative system when it comes to addressing national problems. One need only parse President Obama's state-of-the-union address from earlier this week to see how soon a political mandate could dissipate as goodwill and hope give way to self-interest and fear of compromise. One might note the difference in effectiveness between China's and India's economic stimulus programs, on the one hand, and ours and Europe's, on the other. To be fair, China's and India's economies are centrally planned, and therefore the leadership of those states can direct and dictate the allocation of resources and make investment decisions with little or at least far less concern about domestic politics, political parties, lobbyists, or voter sentiment. Still, the dominance of self-interest and the lack of unity among our political leaders in the face of the country's greatest financial challenge in 80 years, raises serious questions for your generation about our country's changing role in the world—questions we couldn't even imagine just 10 years ago, when the U.S. was the unparalleled and singular economic, military, and political superpower on earth.

You will soon be part of this wider world—a hyper-connected world that is experiencing the after-effects of being perhaps too connected, too soon, and seeing the balance of political and economic power shift before our eyes. Each of you will have to play an important role in that wider, evolving world. And though it is perhaps daunting to think about your next chapter, and how you will participate in all that is going on beyond the hills of Vermont, you should, as I noted earlier, take comfort in the fact that you are well prepared to jump right in. Because of your strong liberal arts background, and your deep appreciation for the power of relationships and community that was honed right here, you are in a great position to make a contribution that matters.

One must be optimistic—at least I am optimistic—because you are part of a generation that, collectively, is pragmatic: far more than any generation I have seen in my 25 years here at Middlebury, you believe in volunteerism, and have shown your desire to get involved.

As you leave this chapter of your lives to become consequential players in solving the large challenges before our country, the best advice I might offer you is rooted in the lessons our faculty conveyed to you *by example* during your time here: learning is a life-long endeavor ... it never ends. Just as the professors with whom you studied learn more and more each year through their research and teaching, you, too, will learn more and more as you research your way through life's journey.

As you put your intelligence, creativity, and compassion to work for the common good, you will be most effective if you exercise humility. You may think you have all the right answers and have learned how to engage people of all walks of life, but make sure to leave space for the reality that you have lots to learn, and indeed *will* learn a great amount from others.

Your Middlebury days as students may have come to an end, but may all that you have learned and experienced here serve you well throughout your lives.

We hope your fond memories of your time at this College will remain with you, and that your bond to the College will be forever strong.

And most of all, we hope that over the course of the four years you have spent in this special place, you have learned, in John Adams'

words, both, how to make a living, *and* how to live.

We wish you well, and look forward to welcoming you back to campus often.

Thank you.

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Office of the President

Old Chapel
9 Old Chapel Road
Middlebury College
Middlebury, VT 05753
802.443.5400
president@middlebury.edu